

# **WHAT'S WRONG WITH AUNTIE MANSA?**

## What Is Wrong with Auntie Mansah? Daniel Tei-Kwabla

**K**ofi Ankomah was more than ready to leave the village and return to the city of Accra with his wife, Elizabeth, and their son, Andrew, when things suddenly fell apart. He had been looking in vain for his cousin, who had promised to give them a ride back, when they heard screams from the kitchen. Everyone came running. "It's Auntie Mansah!" someone shouted. "She has fainted!" By the time Kofi got there, the kitchen was full of people who were desperately trying to bring the old woman back to consciousness. They moved aside to make room for Kofi and he was suddenly aware that every eye in the room was fixed on him. In that instant it seemed that the two very different worlds he inhabited with varying degrees of discomfort came crashing together. Reading the looks on the faces around him was no problem. He knew they expected him to use the powers of his costly Western education to exorcise the evil spirit from Auntie Mansah.

The problem was that his education in Western theology had assumed a world in which there were no spirits. His Western self agreed with that; his African self wasn't so sure. But there was no doubt that he stood now in an African kitchen surrounded by people who lived in an African world. Perspiration beaded his forehead and he began to think he should never have come home.

It was 1969, and Kofi Ankomah had recently returned to Ghana after ten years of theological study abroad. His homecoming was the realization of the dreams and hard work of many people in his family.

Kofi was the second of four sons. His father, Opanian Buafo, had inherited a large cocoa farm. As head of the extended family, Opanian

was responsible for his brothers and their families, for his divorced sister, Mansah, as well as for his own wife and children.

Auntie Mansah, as Kofi's father's sister was called by everyone in the extended family, had become a wealthy trader in cloth. In her travels, she had come to know about the Presbyterian mission in the market town some fifty miles away. After a while, she began taking classes in the mission school and was baptized as a Christian.

Auntie Mansah pleaded with Kofi's father to let him attend the mission school. At first her brother resisted, but when she brought back a new ready-made school uniform for Kofi as a Christmas gift, Opanian was quite impressed. "We must make Kofi a 'white man's child,'" Mansah said. "That is how he can become a wealthy and prestigious man in the tribe." Opanian did not argue; he agreed to let Kofi attend the mission school.

Kofi studied hard. He was in the top of his class and the headmaster took a special interest in him. Gradually, he also became interested in church activities, and a few years later he was baptized. Kofi's mother, brothers, and sisters were baptized at the same time. Opanian, his father, had refused baptism. He was sympathetic to Christianity, but he felt that as head of the extended family he must keep up his responsibilities as priest in the ancestor cult.

When Kofi began to attain physical maturity, his Auntie Mansah began to tease him about girls. She was quite serious, however, when she would urge him to be careful about "those Fanti girls." "Don't allow them to lead you astray," she said. "We will see to it that you get the most beautiful girl from our own Adukrom tribe." Kofi did not pay much attention at the time, for he was too preoccupied with his studies.

In the summer of 1953, a calamity struck the happy family. Opanian had worked all day in the cocoa field planting seedlings. It had begun to rain, but he continued his work because the planting had to be finished. That night he complained of having a cold, but no one took much notice of him. When the condition became worse, however, the family called the local pharmacist, who gave Opanian some medicines. These did not help, so Opanian insisted that they call the medicine man.

Auntie Mansah did not want to do this. Finally they asked a relative who was an elder in the church what they should do. He said that it would be all right to call the medicine man as long as they did not let the minister hear about it. Reluctantly, Auntie Mansah went with some non-Christian relatives to consult the diviner. He told them that Opanian had offended the spirits of the ancestors and that he must sacrifice a goat to pacify them. The diviner had agreed to come the next

day to perform the sacrifice, but he was too late. Opanian had died during the night.

After Opanian's death, Kofi's mother wanted him to leave school and return to the farm, but Auntie Mansah held out against her. "What will the whole village say when your educated son returns to work in the fields? You will lose face, and our family will lose its hope of raising their prestige in the community," Mansah argued.

Kofi's mother gave in, but she told Kofi that he was lazy and useless and that it was time for him to raise his own family. His mother's attitude hurt him badly, and he decided that only Auntie Mansah understood him. Then he made up his mind to continue school, and he returned home only infrequently after that.

After Kofi's graduation, the mission made him a teacher in the market town. Soon after that, impressed by his performance, they granted him a scholarship to study in England. His departure caused a big stir in the village. The family called a prayer meeting in their home, and the pastor cited a prophecy: "The people that sat in darkness have seen a great light."

Turning to Kofi, the pastor said, "In the past, our tribe would have required you to fight in her wars and to bring home human heads as trophies. But we have been delivered by the blood of the Lamb. Today we send you to seek knowledge. Remember, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. I have heard of young men from other towns," the pastor continued, "who went to the white man's country. But instead of bravely facing their studies, they went after the sweet things of the flesh. Some even married white women." The crowd gathered around him murmured its strong disapproval of such behavior. "A man who does that," concluded the pastor, "is lost to his people. He is like rain wasted on the forest. I would have suggested that you take a wife before you leave, but the time is too short."

Kofi remembered his pastor's words and studied hard in England. He acquired a Ph.D. in Theology at Oxford University. He was also a good student of the culture and soon was as adept socially as he was outstanding in his academic achievement. Apparently he forgot to heed his pastor's advice when it came to his social life. His British acculturation was crowned by marriage to a beautiful young woman from that country. In this matter, he quite forgot the pastor and his old-fashioned sermon.

After ten years, when it was time at last to go home, Kofi's excitement and anticipation of the homecoming knew no bounds. He sent a cablegram to inform his family of the time of his arrival.

Auntie Mansah headed the small delegation of relatives at the airport in Accra. Her first words to Kofi expressed her pride in welcoming

him home as a "big man." If only Kofi's parents had survived to see this day!

The first sign of trouble came when Kofi's relatives realized that he had not come alone. His European wife, Elizabeth, and their son, Andrew, were with him. Then Kofi disappointed them even more. He said that they would not be coming directly to the village. Kofi had reserved a hotel room in the city; they would spend the night there and come to the village the next day. This was a bitter disappointment, particularly for Auntie Mansah, who had taken the responsibility for Kofi since the death of his mother.

Trying to make the best of it, Kofi's relatives returned to the village without him. Early the next morning, they began for a second time to make preparations for the welcoming feast. They had killed two fat sheep and a number of chickens for the feast, but because of the delay, much of the cooking would have to be done over again.

A big crowd gathered in spite of the fact that Kofi's kinsmen were complaining because they had not gone to their farms for two days. The Reverend Doctor Kofi Ankomah and his family did not appear until late afternoon. The Adukrom brass band was in attendance. It was nothing short of a festival. Old Pastor Mintah was there with all the rest and opened the service with prayer. Auntie Mansah's second son, who had finished high school, gave a brief welcoming address that praised his cousin for his brilliant academic achievements. Then the celebrations began in earnest with eating, dancing, and drinking.

The festivities showed no signs of coming to an end that evening when Kofi and his wife announced that it was time for them to return to Accra. It was while he was searching for the cousin who was going to take them back that Aunt Mansah collapsed in the kitchen.

Instinctively, Kofi sent one of his relatives to look for transportation to rush his aunt to the hospital. When the older folk heard what he was planning to do, they objected violently. "Auntie Mansah cannot be helped in a European hospital," one old man said contemptuously. "This is a case of spirit possession; someone must exorcise the spirit." As he spoke, all eyes turned to the Reverend Doctor Ankomah as if to say, "Well this is your opportunity; show us your newly acquired spiritual power."

Kofi was still determined that they would take Auntie Mansah to the hospital when his cousin returned with the news that there was no transportation available. He was trapped! There seemed to be nothing to cover a situation like this in the kind of Western theology that he had studied so hard. That theology demythologized all transcendent phenomena such as spirits and demons.

As these thoughts raced through his mind, and as if to add to his confusion, Kofi remembered the circumstances of his father's death. Were the African spirits only in the African's head? Or was Christianity powerless against the African spirits? Kofi wished at that moment that he had never come home. And yet, here he was, standing over his beloved Auntie, who was lying rigid on the floor while everyone in the village watched him carefully. What in heaven's name should he do?